

The Orange

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Source:

The Orange on the Seder Plate

By Susanna Heschel, April 5, 2001

In the early 1980s, the Hillel Foundation invited me to speak on a panel at Oberlin College. While on campus, I came across a Haggadah that had been written by some Oberlin students to express feminist concerns. One ritual they devised was placing a crust of bread on the Seder plate, as a sign of solidarity with Jewish lesbians (there's as much room for a lesbian in Judaism as there is for a crust of bread on the Seder plate) Charoset, a mixture of fruit, nuts, wine and spices, represents the mortar our ancestors used to build the structures of Mitzrayim At the next Passover, I placed an orange on our family's seder plate. During the first part of the Seder, I asked everyone to take a segment of the orange, make the blessing over fruit, and eat it as a gesture of solidarity with Jewish lesbians and gay men, and others who are marginalized within the Jewish community (I mentioned widows in particular). Karpas, a green vegetable, symbolizes hope and renewal. Chazeret, the bitter herb for the "sandwich" we eat later, following the custom established by Hillel the Elder, as a reminder that our ancestors "ate matzah and bitter herbs together" (20) Bread on the Seder plate brings an end to Pesach – it renders everything hametz. And it suggests that being lesbian is being transgressive, violating Judaism. I felt that an orange was suggestive of something else: the fruitfulness for all Jews when lesbians and gay men are contributing and active members of Jewish life. In addition, each orange segment had a few seeds that had to be spit out – a gesture of spitting out, repudiating the homophobia of Judaism. (All the items on the Seder plate also correspond to different kabbalistic sephirot) 19 (21) 20 Why An Orange on the Seder Plate? When lecturing, I often mentioned my custom as one of the many new feminist rituals that have been developed in the last twenty years. Somehow, though, the typical patriarchal maneuver occurred: My idea of an orange and my intention of affirming lesbians and gay men were transformed. Now the story circulates that a man said to me that a woman belongs on the bimah as an orange on the seder plate. A woman's words are attributed to a man, and the affirmation of lesbians and gay men is simply erased. Isn't that precisely what's happened over the centuries to women's ideas? Keep one orange on the Seder plate, and pass out orange slices. As we hold the fruit in our hands, shout out marginalized and invisibilized folks that we want to recognize and fully welcome in to the circle of the loving community we are creating.